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SUBJECT: MR. PUTIN COMES TO GEORGIA

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires a.i. Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary and comment. Russian Prime Minister Putin visited Abkhazia August 12, renewing Russia's commitment to Abkhaz "independence" and promising nearly USD 500 million in spending on military infrastructure. Abkhaz de facto "president" Bagapsh called the visit an example of the "dynamic development of mutually beneficial inter-governmental relations between Russia and Abkhazia," while the Georgian government condemned the visit as an additional violation of international law and a provocative act. Reports of explosive devices detonating in Abkhazia, one of which killed two people, on the same day as Putin's visit point to possible underlying tensions within Abkhazia. Thus far, we have seen no Abkhaz allegations of Georgian involvement in the explosions, and Georgian MOIA officials had no information when we asked about the explosions. At a time when all sides, including Russia, have called for avoiding provocations, the timing of Putin's visit raises questions for the Georgians about Russian commitment to defusing tensions. End summary and comment.

PUTIN ARRIVES ON ANNIVERSARY OF AUGUST WAR'S END

¶12. (SBU) After giving an extensive interview to Abkhaz journalists in Sochi August 11, Prime Minister Putin paid what de facto officials described as a "working visit" to Sukhumi on August 12. Putin visited a memorial to the 1992-93 civil war in Abkhazia and a maternity hospital renovated with Russian assistance and met with de facto officials. He was accompanied by a sizable delegation of Russian government officials, including Defense Minister Serdyukov, Transportation Minister Levitin, Communications Minister Shchegolev, Minister of Regional Development Basargin, Deputy Chief of Staff Ushakov, Krasnodar Governor Tkachev, Director of the State Border Agency Bezdelov, Deputy Health Minister Belov, Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin, and Charge d'Affaires of the Russian "embassy" to Abkhazia Bogolyubov, as well as businessmen from the firms AFK-Sistema, Intourist, Rosneft, and Russian Railways.

¶13. (SBU) During the August 11 interview, Putin said Russia would spend around 15 billion rubles (approximately USD 463 million) in the next year to construct a military base in Abkhazia and fortify the Abkhaz "state border." He also promised a series of more focused "bilateral" agreements between Russia and Abkhazia. At a press conference with Putin on August 12, "president" Bagapsh expressed gratitude for Russia's political and economic support of Abkhazia. He also announced that an agreement on social and economic assistance for Abkhazia had been signed. Putin began his comments by noting the "tragic events" of exactly one year ago that occurred as the result of the "aggression of the Georgian regime," describing Russia's recognition of Abkhaz "independence" as the "natural" outcome of that aggression. He acknowledged the support that Russia provided to Abkhazia over many years and expressed Russia's continued commitment to that support. In response to a question about

international monitors, both Bagapsh and Putin expressed no principled objection to the presence of UN or OSCE personnel, but only on the basis of the new "reality" of Abkhazia's "independence."

AN UNINVITED GUEST

¶4. (U) Georgian authorities expressed "strong protest" over Putin's visit to Abkhazia. A statement released by the OPutin's visit to Abkhazia. A statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the visit a violation of Georgia's border and an example of Russia's continuing defiance of international norms and laws, as well as its own commitments, including in particular the cease-fire agreement of August 12, 2008. The statement also called the visit a "previously planned and deliberate action" and "provocation."

SIGNS OF TENSION

¶5. (C) On the same day as Putin's visit, two explosive devices detonated in Abkhazia: one in Gagra, which killed two people, and one in Sukhumi itself, which caused no injuries. According to local press reports, the Gagra device exploded at 4:47 P.M. in a garbage can on Nartaa Street, killing a cleaning woman and a passerby; the Sukhumi device exploded at 8:20 P.M. underneath a tree near the popular waterfront restaurant Elbrus. According to the Georgian press, some elements of the Russian delegation may have been dining at Elbrus when the device exploded, although Putin had reportedly already left. A UN expatriate representative noted that no immediate allegations of Georgian involvement appeared on the Abkhaz "state" press agency Apsnypress website, suggesting to him that the events were likely

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connected to internal Abkhaz events. He added that opposition to Bagapsh has made considerable headway in the northern portion of Abkhazia, where Gagra is located. He also pointed to recent domestic political clashes among various camps in Abkhazia, some of whom are radical, as a possible source for such incidents. The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs had no information about the incidents. Neither did the EUMM.

COMMENT: UNNECESSARY TIMING

¶6. (C) Coming after Russian President Medvedev's controversial July 13 visit to South Ossetia -- which both the U.S. and the EU condemned as unhelpful to stability in the region -- the arrival in Abkhazia of Prime Minister Putin, who is widely perceived in Georgia as the architect of Russia's aggression against Georgia, right after the anniversary of the end of the August war raises even more questions about the sincerity of Russia's commitment to reducing tensions. Taken in concert with Medvedev's video message to Ukraine, many Georgians see a growing belligerence from their northern neighbor.

LOGSDON